CHAPTER 7

ARMED FORCES PIONEERS IN PROGRAMMING

Programming always remained at the heart of AFRS. If General Osborn had selected a newsman to create and run military broadcasting, the whole character of the operation might have assumed a different personality. But Osborn didn't select a newsman – he chose Tom Lewis

Lewis had spent his broadcasting career on the entertainment side of radio. He'd produced programs during the time when advertising agencies created programming and sold it directly to the networks. He knew programing. He believed the entertainment "side of the house" was paramount to provide the troops with recreation and relaxation. Once he had the audience, he could more readily get across the military's morale and informational messages. It was an excellent doctrine, one that would prove correct. Since Lewis recruited his original staff from the entertainment side as well, it was natural that the "Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule" contained many commercial type programs.

To begin programming as quickly as possible, Lewis created the AFRS Progam Production Section. Although his audience survey was not yet completed, Lewis' original staffers had the commercial broadcast experience to analyze audience preferences, albeit civilian. They'd find the differences to military minimal. Besides, their civilian orientation diminished the tendency of armed forces broadcasters to propagandize in military-ese, much to the delight of their homesick clientele.

Yet, their programming would not be a simple rehash of civilian fare. Erik Barnouw, in the Office of Information and Education, later observed how the new citizen-soldier audience developed different tastes from its civilian interests. "Although civilians in uniform make up the audience," he said, "it is not a civilian audience. A new, different life, remote form familiar surroundings, the constant focus on the task of war, these condition its tastes, reactions, and emotional needs. Research...gives us more detailed insight into the factors involved. The Army's detailed studies, reports and analyses on the psychology of the overseas soldier have formed an invaluable basis on which to proceed."

Regardless of what reseach said, no one in the beginning could be sure what new programming shoud contain. The primary concern was simply to get started as quickly as possible.

The initial programming plan as set forth in the "Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule," called for AFRS to develop a series of shows especially for the servicemen. However, it provided only a tentative idea of the direction AFRS programming would take. Major Mann Holiner, the second AFRS Program Production Section Chief, explained. "Our audience wasn't available for questioning that would bring immediate answers. All we could do was gather all information that was readily available, to apply our best judgment to the program and then go to work."(2)

THE FIRST AFRS SHOWS

The first show that appeared, "Mail Call," retained the same name as the proposed program in the memo. The format called for a 30-minute show prepared weekly with the cooperation of the major motion picture studios. It would take the form of a letter written by the folks at home to a serviceman abroad. The final product more closely resembled "Command Performance," which was still being produced by the Army's Bureau of Public Relations.

The first "Mail Call" was a half-hour, live program, produced and recorded on August 11, 1942, at the Hollywood CBS studios. True Boardman produced it. Bob Lee and Jerry Lawrence wrote the script. The cast included Lewis' famous wife, Loretta Young, as the Mistress of Ceremonies, Bob Hope, Frances Langford, and comic Jerry Colona. Captain Tom McKnight soon replaced Boardman as the producer. As time went on, many AFRS writers would routinely contribute scripts for the shows.

The first shows included short sequences form current motion pictures. After the thirteenth program, the format changed to featuring a U.S. state. Early programs contained too much sentimentalism and the explicit messages failed to help improve troop morale. so the format evolved to entertainment containing more implied messages. Ultimately, "Mail Call" became a musical variety show featuring leading Hollywood entertainers reflecting the response of the troops. And it became a hit.

Although some disagreement exists, "Melody Roundup" was likely the second AFRS program. Initially transcribed on August 28, 1942, cowboy crooner Roy Rogers hosted the first four programs. Subsequently, the fifteen-minute show featured many leading Country Western entertainers.

In contrast, "Personal Album," initially recorded on October 1, 1942, featured Bing Crosby as the host, and more popular singers. Lieutenant Colonel Ted Sherdeman, producer of the show, recalled that the original intent of the program was to feature voice-track announcements of female singers introducing their commercial recordings. Female vocalists appeared on twenty-three of the first thirty quarter-hour shows. Ultimately, the PPS changed the format to a completely live show with a featured singer,

accompanying artists and an announcer. The guest of the week spoke personally to the audience, but, unlike "Command Performance" and "Mail Call," he didn't dedicate songs to specific servicemen.

"Yarns for Yanks," which AFRS first transcribed on October 3, was an adaptation by Lawrence and Lee from their civilian program "Nite Cap Yarns." The broadcasts contained fifteen-minute human-interest stories told in several voices by one man. Frank Graham recorded the first eighteen programs after which many Hollywood stars appeared in the series.

"Jubilee," was a Mann Holiner production, first transcribed for the troops on October 9. Holiner, in civilian life, had been a specialist in the production of black theatricals. He'd produced the "Blackbird" reviews on Broadway and his highly successful show also called "Jubilee," had launched the careers of many of the most famous black variety entertainers. His military version was a legendary hit.

When the Program Production Section (PPS) decided to use Holiner to create a program featuring black artists, an original planning memo proposed a program entitled "Freedom's People." It would aim "directly for, at, and to represent the large number of 'colored' troops." The Army thought, "Here we can use some of the magnificent recorded programs of 'colored' music prepared by the WPA and by the Office of Education. Because of the importance of the morale factors involved -- this show should develop into an ambitious production."(3)

Holiner didn't believe the show should be slanted to *any* certain audience. Instead, its entertainment should provide a morale lift to all troops, white or black. As the production idea evolved, the PPS decided to produce a fine variety show using leading talent. To avoid the impression of slanting the program and so spotlighting the existence of black-white conflicts within the military, AFRS took the name of Holiner's successful radio program "Jubilee."

Ethel Waters, Rex Ingram, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra and the Hal Johnson Choir made up the cast for the first program. Charles Vanda and the civilian writers in Hollywood donated their time to create the script. The program itself established historical foundations of AFRS policy in regard to blacks and other minority groups. AFRS would produce no special morale programs for any minority during the war.

In 1944, General Benjamin Davis, the Army's only black general officer at the time, made a special trip to AFRS headquarters. He asked that the staff slant "Jubilee" even more to help improve black morale. Holiner disagreed, but the staff thought Davis's proposal had merit. Holiner argued that slanting "Jubilee" would bring to light the very existence of race problems within the military. Rather than improve black morale, slanting "Jubilee" would inherently make it worse. Holiner felt that the interests of the Armed Forces would be best served by completely overlooking the existence of such difficulties. He convinced General Davis.

Following the meeting, Truman Gibson Jr., a civilian aide to Secretary of War Stimson, wrote to Lewis thanking him for the briefings he'd given Davis. Gibson added that the inspection had convinced him that Lewis's organization was "easily the best from an administrative point of view that I've thus far come across. The Assistant Secretary of War expessed particular interest in my description of your many activities and your intentions to present material about the 'Negoes.'"(4)

When Major Austin Peterson later toured the Pacific, however, he found that morale was particularly low among black troops. So he gave priority to requests for black entertainers appearing on "Command Performance." Until that time, it had only featured whites. Bob Welch, the producer of both "Command Performance" and "Jubilee," responded to the requirement. He put blacks on "CP" and, if he felt their appearance would enhance the show, he put white artists on "Jubilee" as well. As a result, both shows became integrated, another important -- and foundational -- precedent for AFRS.(5)

The first religious program, "Music for Sunday," debuted on February 2, 1943. It highlighted thirty minutes of music of all faiths and denominations. Originally, the producers assembled "Music for Sunday" from music tracks obtained from radio broadcasts and from other tracks they got from non-broadcast sources. Occasionally, they recorded special music tracks for the series. A narration recorded by an AFRS announcer linked all the segments. It remained the major religious show.

One of AFRS' most successful ideas was the feature in "Command Performance" wherein the American fighting man could "command" the talents of any American performer. To be sure, not all entertainers relished the idea that they might be called at any time to appear on "Command Performance," "Mail Call" or the other AFRS shows. Yet, except for Clark Gable, Joan Crawford and a few others who had real problems appearing in front of a microphone and a live audience, few entertainers dared to voice objections when called upon. Fortunately, most saw their appearances as an opportunity to contribute directly to the war effort. People like Bob Hope, Doris Day, Edgar Bergen, Bing Crosby and Jerry Colona became regulars on AFRS programs.

There were limits to how often artists could be asked to give of their time. The *Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule* explained, "It is the position of the artists' organizations that since the government does not expect an automobile manufacturer, for example, whose stock-in-trade is automobiles, to provide them free for the armed forces, neither should the government expect a performing

artist, playing an instrument, to provide his talents free. The organizations generally make exceptions in the cases of outstanding stars who receive favorable publicity for their cooperation and who by virtue of their large incomes can better afford to contribute to a greater number of free performances."

In order to prevent exploitation of star performers and to spread the talent around, Tom Lewis created a Talent Subsection. Sergeants George Rosenberg and Lester Linski and Corporal Barron Polan composed the group. Before entering the military, the three had been talent agents with much experience in artist procurement. They quickly developed a standard operating procedure for securing talent. The AFRS writers of producers of the individual programs would ask the Talent Subsection to request the desired performer. In turn, the Subsection would contact the Hollywood Victory Committee (the Hollywood industry-wide coordinating agency) who scheduled the appearences at no charge to the government. Unless the artist had a real conflict with his or her schedule, the entertainer normally agreed to the request.

Few problems developed. Some minor dificulties occurred when writers, producers and the administrative staff tried to obtain artists directly. This caused popular artists to feel put upon. Some expressed reluctance to accept a request too soon after a previous appearance. AFRS also had difficulty in obtaining New York talent because of the distances involved in traveling. Usually the only time a performer residing in the East appeared was when he or she visited the West Coast. Finally, overseas stations sometimes failed to mention a performer's previous appearance when the entertainer visited the front as part of a USO tour. That led to more complaints.

For the most part, however, the contribution of those in the entertainment field cannot be overestimated. Their appearances on many programs enabled AFRS to produce these shows in-house. The absence of this capability would have severely limited the scope of the entertainment that AFRS provided. Early on, AFRS began to distribute many of the commercially-produced programs -- first by short wave and later on discs. however, these commercial shows didn't focus on the man in uniform like the AFRS programs did. It was also impossible to include "infomercials" in them, as the service could do with its own shows.

Nonetheless, the in-house shows not by themselves fill the broadcast schedules of the stations. Nor could they alone bring the homefront to the troops in the field, and that was impotant. The barren soil of Iwo Jima might seem less alien if Marines could listen to Jack Benny on Tuesday night just as they had done in thier own homes. The in-house productins were unique, but they bore only a general resemblance to network programming. So, for both practical and mission reasons, AFRS turned to commercial programs for most of its programming.

Robert Sherwood, wartime OWI Overseas Division Chief, took credit for developing the practice of deleting commercial messages on government short wave. According to Sherwood, "The decommercialization was entirely my responsibility, I thought it would be a serious mistake for the United States to speak to the world with the voice of salesmanship. I met a surprising amount of argument when I directed that commercials must be eliminated. Some officers insisted that the men liked the commercials, which made them feel at home. I clinched my case when hungry men of Bataan heard a description of the rich, creamy goodness of some ice cream. It disgusted them."(6)

John Houseman, the East Cost OWI short-wave programming chief, reported that the OWI deleted commercial announcements from the beginning. Neither sponsors nor the various unions complained.(7)

Lewis never considered including commercials in the domestic programs AFRS included in its schedule. When he approached the ad agencies, networks and commercial sponsors to use their programs, he received immediate permission for AFRS to edit and distribute their programs overseas. Through arrangments with the talent and musician unions and the copyright owners of material used, the military received rights to rebroadcast all such material. The American Federation of Musicians even exempted the AFRS from regular "stand-by orchestra fee" for the rebroadcast of transcribed shows, on the condition that the AFRS programs contain no commercials.

AFRS had several other reasons for deciding to "denature" their programs. First, commercial announcements would tend to make men desire things they couldn't obtain: ice cream, cola, or cosmetically-enhanced wives or sweethearts. Second, since AFRS couldn't use all commercial programs, the advertisers on a non-selected program might suffer disadvantage. Finally, when AFRS began to use BBC facilities to broadcast its programs, BBC policy itself forbade commercials.

Besides the advertisements, AFRS quickly found it had to censor material that would give comfort to the enemy, create morale problems, or ones that just lacked timeliness. Jokes about coal strikes and defense workers might well not be funny to a soldier in a foxhole. Public service announcements promoting conservation of scarce materials might give information to the enemy who surely monitored AFRS broadcasts.

Decisions on program selection rested with the AFRS Program Board. Initially, their choices reflected the preferences of the American listening public as a whole. As time went on, however, the Board made changes based on letters it received. The troops didn't want westerns or programs featuring juveniles. They liked mystery dramas with a strong touch of horror. Within the changes, the Program

Board still followed the practice of selecting the top-rated American shows.

Finally, besides the education and information shows and the commercial broadcasts, AFRS provided news, sports and special events daily. They applied no censorship of content to the real-time broadcasts except in the matter of actual military security.

From the very beginning, Lewis believed that the troops should receive the same news and information Americans back home were recieving, both the good and the bad. The troops would receive all the news in time by letter anyway. If AFRS presented the news accurately, it would gain credibility and thereby acceptance of its education and information programming as well. Such acceptance was very important.

Audiences, both civilian and military, who listened to AFRS, came to trust it's news. Credibility and acceptance. It took a lot of hard work and some very dedicated people to accomplish it, but AFRS did it.

They had forged still another history-making legacy.

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(1) Erik Barnouw, "Radio Programs for Troop Education," *Education Outlook*, March 1945. p 19.
(2) Mann Holiner in Thomas Lewis's *JANC Radio Sub committee 1944 Report*, January 20, 1944, p 20.
(3) *Memorandum of Projected Initial Program Schedule*, p 27.
(4) Truman Gibson Jr. to Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Lewis, May 1944.
(5) AFRS, *Negro Policy Memorandum*, n.d./1944.
(6) Robert Sherwood to T.S. DeLay, July 4, 1950.
(7) John Houseman to T.S. DeLay, July 19, 1950.